

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L VIENNA 3733

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PGOV, AU

SUBJECT: AUSTRIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS ANNOUNCED

SUMMARY: GOVERNMENT HAS DECIDED TO HOLD PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS ON JUNE 23. SOCIALISTS WILL MEET APRIL 30 AND WILL, IN ALL PROBABILITY, NOMINATE FOREIGN MINISTER KIRCHSCHLAEGER AS THEIR CANDIDATE. PEOPLE'S PARTY GATHERING SET FOR MAY 2 AT WHICH EX-VICE CHANCELLOR WITHALM IS ODDS ON FAVOIRTE TO BE CHOSEN AS CANDIDATE OF CONSERVATIVE PARTY. PUNDITS AT MOMENT PREDICT KIRCHSCHLAEGER WILL WIN ELECTIONS BY CONFORTABLE MAJORITY. END SUMMARY.

1. AUSTRIAN PRESIDENT JONAS, EVEN IN DYING RENDERED SOCIALIST PARTY, WHICH HAD ELEVATED HIM TO HIGHEST OFFICE, USEFUL SERVICE. HIS DEATH ON APRIL 23 AND NOT LATER IN WEEK ENABLED SOCIALIST GOVERNMENT TO SET JUNE 24 AS DATE FOR ELECTION OF HIS SUCCESSOR. A LATER DEATH BY JONAS WOULD HAVE MOVED ELECTION DATE, BECAUSE OF TIME REQUIREMENTS FOR FILING AND ELECTION CAMPAIGN, INTO FALL 1974, GIVING OPPOSITION PARTY MORE TIME TO BUILD UP ITS CANDIDATE.

2. SOCIALIST PARTY LEADERSHIP IS SCHEDULED TO MEET APRIL 30, ONE DAY FOLLWOING JONAS'S FUNERAL, TO NOMI-
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NATE ITS CANDIDATE FOR PRESIDENCY. CANCELLOR KREISKY

STRONGLY FAVORS FOREIGN MINISTER KIRCHSCHLAEGER AS PARTY'S CHOICE. KIRCHSCHLAEGER'S PROJECTION OF FATHER IMAGE (IMPORTANT IN HIERARCHICAL AUSTRIAN SOCIETY), HIS KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE IN INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS, AND HIS KNDEBTEDNESS TO SOCIALIST PARTY, PARTICULARLY KREISKY, FOR ELEVATING HIM FROM RANKS OF CAREER DIPLOMATIC SERVICE TO FOREIGN MINISTER ARE ADDITIONAL FACTORS FAVORING HIS SELECTION BY SOCIALISTS. SCATTERED SOCIALIST OPPOSITION TO KIRCHSCHLAEGER CANDIDACY, BASED ON FACT THAT KIRCHSCHLAEGER IS NOT MEMBER OF SOCIALIST PARTY AND IS PROMINENT MEMBER OF CATHOLIC FRATERNITY, IS NOT EXPECTED TO BE SUFFICIENT TO CONTEST WHAT APPEARS TO BE KIRCHSCHLAEGER'S LIKELY SELECTION. OPPOSITION PARTIES, PARTICULARLY PEOPLE'S PARTY, WILL BELABOR KIRCHSCHLAEGER IN PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN FOR HIS GENERAL SILENCE ON WEAKNESS OF AUSTRIAN MILITARY FORCES AND ON CONTROVERSIAL ISSUE OF LEGAL ABORTION WHICH WAS RECENTLY PUT THROUGH BY SOCIALIST MAJORITY IN AUSTRIAN PARLIAMENT. DESPITE THESE POSSIBLE POLITICAL LIABILITIES, KIRCHSCHLAEGER IS EXPECTED TO CONDUCT EFFECTIVE PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN AND BE EASY WINNER.

3. PEOPLE'S PARTY LEADERSHIP WILL MEET MAY 2 TO NOMINATE ITS CANDIDATE WHO MORE THAN LIKELY WILL BE FORMER VICE CHANCELLOR HERMANN WITHALM. WITHALM HAS A REPUTATION FOR BEING A STRONG PERSONALITY WHO, HOWEVER, HAS, IN PAST, GENERATED CONSIDERABLE CONTROVERSY WITHIN PARTY AS TO HIS JUDGEMENT AND ABILITY TO DEAL WITH CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES. IN MORE RECENT PERIOD, WITHALM HAS BEEN BUSY IN EFFORT TO RE-MOLD HIS IMAGE OF SHIRTSLEEVE POLITICAL IN-FIGHTER TO THAT OF ELDER STATESMAN, AN IMAGE CONSIDERED MORE APPROPRIATE FOR AN AUSTRIAN PRESIDENT. THERE IS SOME HESITANCY WITHIN PEOPLE'S PARTY AS TO DESIRABILITY OF EVEN RUNNING CANDIDATE AGAINST SOCIALISTS WHO HAVE ALWAYS HELD PRESIDENCY SINCE 1945. THIS VIEW BASED IN PARTY ON DESIRE OF AUSTRIAN BUSINESS CIRCLES,WHO OBVIOUSLY WILL BE APPROACHED FOR CAMPAIGN FUNDS, TO SAVE THEIR COIN FOR NEXT PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS WHICH, CONFIDENTIAL

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AT THIS DATE, SHOW POPULAR SUPPORT TO BE ABOUT EVENLY DIVIDED BETWEEN TWO MAJOR PARTIES.

4. PEOPLE'S PARTY CHAIRMAN FOR LOWER AUSTRIA, MAUERER, REPORTEDLY MADE QUICK TRIP TO NEW YORK LAS WEEK IN EFFORT TO PERSUADE UN SECRETARY GENERAL KURT WALDHEIM, WHO ACCORDING TO OPINION POLLS COULD BEAT KIRCHSCHLAEGER, TO ACCEPT PEOPLE'S PARTY CANDIDACY. WALDHEIM, WHO

OBVIOUSLY ENJOYS POWER AND PRESTIGE OF SECRETARY-
GENERALSHIP AND WHO COULD STILL RUN FOR AUSTRIAN
PRESIDENCY AT LATER DATE, REAFFIRMED HIS DECISION NOT
TO RUN.

5. SMALL FREEDOM PARTY WILL MEET ON MAY 7 FOR WHAT IS
EXPECTED TO BE DECISION NOT TO NOMINATE ANY CANDIDATE
AND TO ALLOW PARTY MEMBERS TO VOTE THEIR PREFERENCE.
COMMUNIST PARTY, ONLY OTHER ORGANIZED PARTY OF ANY
STATURE IN AUSTRIA, HAS NOT GIVEN ANY INDICATIONS AS
TO HOW IT WILL REACT TO KIRCHSCHLAEGER - WITHALM CHOICE.

6. ELECTION CAMPAIGN WILL BE TOUGH BUT FAIR. BOTH
KIRCHSCHLAEGER AND WITHALM ARE STRONG PERSONALITIES, EACH
IN HIS OWN WAY. THUS AUSTRIANS WILL BE GIVEN REAL
CHOICE OF ALTERNATIVES. AT MOMENT, KIRCHSCHLAEGER IS
CONSIDERED LIKELY TO BE ELECTED NEXT PRESIDENT OF AUSTRIA
BY COMFORTABLE MARGIN.HUMES

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